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ABSTRACT

Increased concern has been directed toward students who have been identified as disaffected or alienated and who are not responding to the traditional school program. These students are not usually classifiable as educationally handicapped. A system-wide programmatic approach to deal with disaffected and disruptive students in a manner that allows the school psychologist to make optimal use of his time and to maximize staff involvement was developed. A needs assessment plan was formulated which included accessing data on achievement test scores; attendance; suspension and detention; requests for parental conferences; discipline referrals; excessive sickness; and a rating of students by teachers as functioning adequately, showing disaffected or disruptive behavior, and/or already deemed classifiable or warranting referral for evaluation. The needs assessment revealed that the number of students identified as disaffected or disruptive increased from kindergarten to 12th grade. Several possible programs were selected based on which would have the greatest potential for having an impact. These included: (1) a teacher-student mentor program; (2) a group session with teacher-student pairs; (3) an intensive intervention program for at-risk students; (4) self-awareness and exploration of feelings curriculum modules; and (5) teacher inservice. Building level committees screened students for intervention and followed up on their recommendations. The program was flexible, allowed for gradual implementation, and utilized a variety of staff members. However, it encountered staff resistance from those who feared another "faddish" program. (ABL)

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The School Psychologist and Program Development of Disaffected/Disruptive Students

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The School Psychologist and Program Development of Disaffected/Disruptive Students

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PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

Increased concern has been directed nationwide towards students who have been variously identified as disaffected, alienated, turned off, etc. and who are not responding to the traditional instructional program. Additionally, such students are usually not classifiable under PL 94-142 as educationally handicapped and eligible for special education services.

Contemporaneously, school psychologists in several states are, either as a result of legislation and regulation, or by virtue of their expanding their professional responsibilities, have begun to become increasingly involved in prevention and pre-referral intervention work. Unfortunately, demands for psychological services that are mandated under PL 94-142 (evaluation, IEP preparation, implementation and evaluation, etc.) often limit the amount of time and effort spent on prevention and pre-referral intervention activities.

This presentation discusses a system-wide programmatic approach to deal with the issue of disaffected and disruptive students in a manner that allows the school psychologist to make optimal use of his/her time and to maximize staff involvement in the provision of a range of services.

Engendered as a result of the expressed perceptions of administrators and staff of a mid-sized suburban school district in central New Jersey, as to the presence of significant numbers of students who were viewed as either "turned - off" (disaffected) relative to school, or disruptive, a steering committee was formed to investigate this problem and develop a strategy for intervention. The committee was chaired by the local school psychologist and consisted of staff from each school and representatives from administration, special services, guidance, health services and faculty.

This committee, called the Disaffected Youth Committee (DYC) first identified the various contextual issues relative to the school system that would impact on any committee efforts. It was determined through discussions of committee members that staff resistance could be expected since a previous program was imple-

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mented several years earlier with a similar intent. That program involved the importation of a program from outside of the district in which the staff had little involvement or investment. When the project personnel left after one year, the program folded and many staff felt the program had failed because of the lack of opportunity for them to provide input. Given the broad spectrum of district personnel represented on the DYC it was felt that staff input was already being obtained for this project and could be additionally fostered by DYC members periodically reporting back on the progress of committee work to their respective groups.

The DYC's initial responsibility was to conduct a problem clarification analysis and to structure and focus the work of the committee. A needs assessment plan was designed and implemented for the purpose of identifying staff perceptions regarding the extent and nature of the problem of disaffected youth locally. A guiding definition was developed for Disaffected Youth (See Figure 1):

FIGURE 1

"The disaffected student is one who exhibits significant difficulty functioning in school. Such a child is distinguished from one who is classifiable and who needs child study team intervention by the degree or severity of the functional deficits. This child may also be distinguished from the child who is functioning adequately but who may experience occasional difficulties, by the persistence of exhibited problems over a period of time. Additionally, the disaffected student possess a low self-esteem and poor self-image which is manifested by several of the problems listed. Finally, rather than exhibiting one or two of the characteristics listed, this child exhibits many characteristics across several of the dimensions."

Development of Needs Assessment Plan

Utilizing this definition, the DYC developed a needs assessment plan that included the accumulation of data from several sources including:

1. Achievement Test Scores
2. Attendance
3. Suspension and detention rates
4. Requests for parental conferences by the Guidance Counselor or Principal
5. Discipline referrals
6. Reports by nurses re: excessive sickness
7. School Adjustment Scale (SAS) - see below

The School Adjustment Scale

The School Adjustment Scale (SAS) was developed to obtain information regarding teachers' perceptions of their students. The questionnaire presented 65 statements regarding a child's functioning in five areas: School Issues; Emotional/Behavioral Issues; Interpersonal Adjustment - Peers; Adult Interaction and Authority Issues; and Family issues. Staff were asked to rate the frequency

with which each statement applied to the child in question using a four point rating scale.

Prior to completing the questionnaire, staff were asked, based on their global impression of the child, if they felt the child was "Functioning Adequately", "Disaffected", "Disruptive", or "Classifiable or referable". Staff were provided with the following operational definitions to be used in the application of this rating:

Functioning Adequately - Though from time to time isolated problems may arise, overall the child is functioning in school.

Disaffected Students - Difficulties in school are often manifested by under-achievement, poor self-esteem, passive behavior and an inability to cope with stress. The student usually does not actively disrupt the academic process.

Disruptive Students - Though also often an underachiever, with poor self-esteem and poor ability to cope with stress, this student reacts by disrupting the class and the school by his/her behavior.

Classifiable or referable - This student is either already classified or exhibits problems severe enough to warrant referral for evaluation.

SAS's were completed on one-half of the entire school population based on a random selection process. Additionally, as a reliability check, one-half of the sample group was rated by two different teachers (at the middle and high school level where the academic program is departmentalized and the student has several teachers during the course of the school day).

This data was collected and analyzed and the following results were obtained. Inter-rater reliability was relatively low highlighting (as determined by an post-hoc analysis of the data) the importance of the teacher variable (i.e. who the teacher was). Students who were rated by one staff member as having significant problems was not identified by a second staff member suggesting the importance of teacher-student interaction on classroom functioning. The existence of this variable was found to be teacher independent; that is, the same teacher did not consistently identify students as disaffected who were not identified by the second staff member. Therefore, teacher 1 may have identified student A as disaffected while teacher 2 did not. At the same time, student B may have been identified as disaffected by teacher 2 but not identified by teacher 1.

The results did not adequately differentiate classified from disaffected or disruptive. This was not surprising since it was acknowledged that the sensitivity of the instrument to make fine distinctions of degree at the upper ranges was weak and because of the similarity of the behaviors of many classified students with those identified as disruptive or disaffected. Finally, a factor analysis of the results showed a correlation between certain characteristics and disaffected or disruptive students (See Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Possible Characteristics of Disaffected Students

SCHOOL

poor grades
underachiever
retention
absenteeism
tardiness
short attention span
easily frustrated
easily distracted
avoids asking questions
complains of illness
demonstrates little achievement motivation
looks for excuses to leave class
acts inappropriately situations

EMOTIONAL/BEHAVIOR

appears unhappy
exhibits mood swings
nervous habits
cries easily, pouts
looks unkempt in appearance and attire
negative self-concept
sensitive to criticism
fears failure
indecisive

INTERPERSONAL - PEERS

avoids peer interactions
has difficulty conversing
plays with younger children
avoids interaction with opposite sex
avoids new situations
difficulty making & keeping friends
scapegoated by others

INTERPERSONAL - ADULTS

attention seeking
makes hollow promises
resists help and support of adults
withdraws from adult contact
has difficulty expressing feelings
avoids talking with adults

FAMILY

severe family difficulties
problems at home as well as in school
cultural conflict
recent family change (e.g. divorce)
economic/financial problems
lacks family support for school
under family pressure to succeed
home/school conflict re: discipline issues

While not all identified students showed all these characteristics, substantially more of these characteristics were present in this population than that identified as functioning adequately. Based on this analysis, the DYC decided that the range of problems exhibited by these students was too great to be adequately addressed by a single program. Therefore, a multi-faceted approach needed to be developed and the "panacea" approach avoided at all costs.

PROGRAM DESIGN

The needs assessment revealed that the number of students identified increased from Kindergarten to 12th grade. The DYC felt that both prevention and intervention type programs were needed. Additionally, the needs and problems of the students varied considerably at the different school levels (elementary, middle, and high school). Finally, certain problems were felt to be better addressed at an individual level, others at a group level and still others at a system level. A three level program design was developed and is presented in Figure 3.

Eighteen different cells or program types can be identified from this structure. The DYC began to research existing programs within the district to see what was currently being done and into which cell such programs might fall. For example, at that time, the School Psychologist was running a group at the middle school for students who were identified as developing academic problems. This program was identified as falling into the cell "Middle School - Group - Intervention". The availability of guidance counselors at the high school for personal guidance was seen as falling into the category of "High School - Individual - Prevention and Intervention". Thus, current curricula and programs were reviewed. Subsequently, the committee examined those areas where either no program existed or insufficient attention had been paid. The DYC began to research programs that had been implemented in other schools as well as studying the literature to develop ideas for programs where none existed.

Potential programs were evaluated according to the following 10 characteristics:

1. Cost of program and its implementation
2. Utilization of existing staff and resources
3. Demands on staff time
4. Demands on student time
5. Goals and objectives of program either are, or can be clearly identified or delineated and measured
6. Potential for significant impact
7. Relevancy and importance relative to goals of the disaffected program
8. Training requirements
9. Appropriate grade levels
10. Feasibility given local (and political) constraints

DISAFFECTED YOUTH PROJECT PROGRAM DESIGN

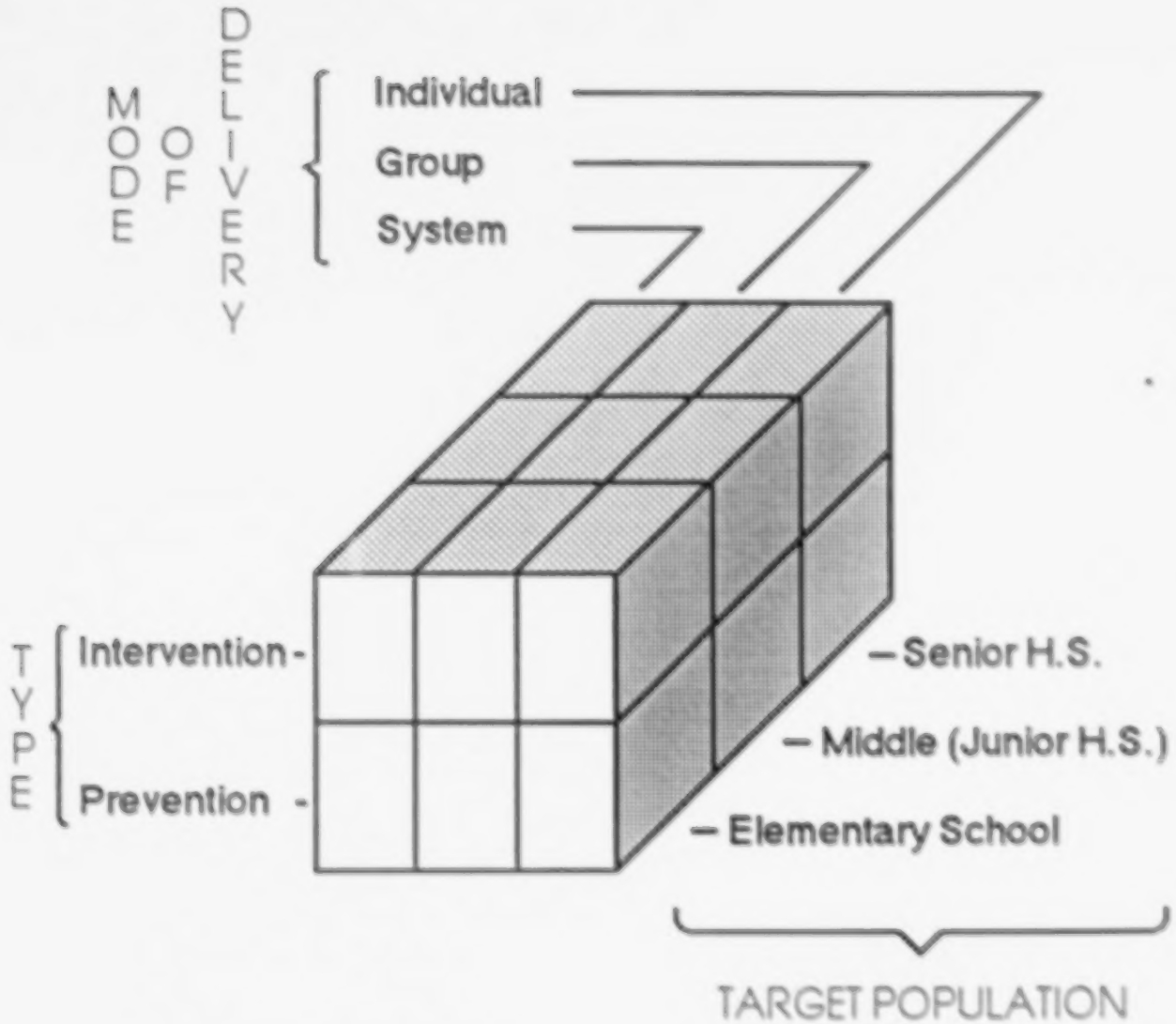

FIGURE 3

Several possible programs were identified and selected based on the determination of which would have the greatest potential for having an initial impact and included, among others, the following:

1. Teacher - Student Mentor program (All levels - Individual - Intervention)

   This program paired teacher volunteers with identified students. The paired teacher would have no academic or supervisory authority over the child but rather was responsible for becoming a significant source of support within the school environment. Daily contact was to be made even if it consisted only of a brief "Good Morning" and small talk. Additionally, several times a week the teacher and student were to meet for longer rap sessions (10-15 minutes) where the student could let off steam, express frustration or talk about the Yankees. The critical element of this relationship was for the student to see the teacher as someone who cared about him/her and was interested in his/her welfare. This was in response to what had been an identified concern from students that the teacher's weren't really interested in them or that the school didn't really see them as persons.

2. Group session with teacher - student pairs (All levels, Intervention Group)

   Periodically, the teacher student pairs at the various schools would meet together in group for larger rap sessions under the guidance of a mental health worker (a graduate student from a nearby clinical/school psychology training program).

3. Intensive Intervention Program for At-risk Students (Middle, H.S. levels - Intervention - Group and Individual)

   Through a cooperative relationship with the Mental Health Clinic of Rutgers University, a program was established for students who were seriously disruptive or depressed and felt to be at-risk for substance abuse, drop out, or difficulties with authorities. These students were involved in weekly group sessions in school conducted by a Rutgers graduate psychology student, family counseling through the Rutgers University Mental Health Clinic and coordinated efforts between school administration, parents and clinicians regarding handling problems with the students in school.

5. Self-awareness, exploration of feelings curriculum modules as part of the health and social studies curricula (Elementary, Middle - Prevention - Group and System)

6. Teacher Inservice Training (All levels - Prevention - System)

IMPLEMENTATION

The DYC determined that implementation of the project would require closer coordination at the building level than could be achieved by the DYC. Therefore, Building Level Screening Committees (BLSC) were formed in each school. Composed of a teacher, an administrator and a guidance counselor (at the elementary level, a second teacher), the BLSCs were responsible for screening students who were recommended by staff as being either disaffected or disruptive, and for coordinating overall implementation of the project at the building level. A representative of each BLSC joined the DYC Steering committee for the purpose of inter-school coordination and overall supervision of the project which was renamed DISCOVERY.

The Building Level Screening Committee

Membership on the BLSC rotated so that 1 member changed each year. The goal was to eventually have all the teachers in a building serve on the BLSC at one point, and to more equitably divide the work among staff.

The process employed by the BLSCs was as followed:

1. Staff members would bring the names of students with whom they were concerned to the monthly meetings of the BLSC after completing a SAS on the child and a data summary form listing information regarding achievement test scores, attendance, etc.

2. The SAS was scored and the results compared with the initial administration on one-half of the school population. Any score within 0 and +1 standard deviation was considered within the average range, between +1 and +2 as within the problem range and beyond +2 standard deviations as being in the severe problem range. No cutoff score was used. The purpose of the SAS was to provide descriptive and comparative information for use in determining what course of action the BLSC should take with the youngster.

3. After reviewing this information and discussing the child with the referring teacher, the BLSC would make one of four possible recommendations.

    i. Collection of more information (with specification of what information they desired)

    ii. Referral to one of the intervention programs

    iii. Referral to the Child Study Team for evaluation

    iv. No referral - specific recommendations made to the teacher with follow-up at the next meeting.

The committee was responsible for periodically following up on students during the course of the year. Additionally, they would conduct an analysis of their work and case disposition at the end of the year. Individual components of

the DISCOVERY project would be evaluated and a determination made of whether or not the goals and objectives of the individual program were meet.

The BLSC was also responsible for assisting staff in the implementation of the various prevention programs which were in place in the district.

Finally, together with the District oversight committee, the BLSCs were responsible for making revisions to the various programs as the need arose. One of the key elements of the DISCOVERY project was its flexibility, in particular, the fact that staff and administration were not wedded to any single program concept. Therefore, greater objectivity existed when it was necessary to evaluate whether a program was meeting its objectives. If the program was not being successful, the staff were willing to examine the program, change it or if necessary terminate it and look for a substitute. This fluidity also serves the district well to the extent that it allows DISCOVERY to grow with the district. Not all cells of the 18 cell program design were implemented. The process of DISCOVERY is one of evolution and change to meet the changing needs of the district.

REVIEW OF PROGRAM STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Strenghts

- Clearly, the most salient strength of this project was its flexibility and fluidity. The wide range of program options made it more likely that a program would be found to meet a particular student's needs than placing all identified children into a similar program which, while generically appropriate, may be missing key elements in terms of the individual child's problems.

- Additionally, the range of programmatic alternatives, discouraged overcommitment or investment in a single program or approach. Too frequently change is discouraged by fear of losing the only available alternative or because so much time and effort is invested in a program, that staff are reluctant to let it go or objectively evaluate its effectiveness.

- The project allowed for implementation to take place over several years permitting gradual assimilation and to avoid overwhelming or overburdening staff with new demands.

- The use of representatives of faculty, administration, guidance, special services, etc. ensured input from all concerned, helped integrate the program into existing structures, systems and processes, and provided for a continuity from building to building and level to level (e.g. middle school to high school). Additionally, such a structure ensured continued staff involvement and support.

- The staff throughout the project's development, felt they were an integral part of the process and developed a sense of accomplishment as they helped students and become more effective teachers and administrators them-

selves. Additionally, staff supported each other and were therefore more likely to respect the ideas, suggestions and recommendations offered by their colleagues than those that may have been offered by an outsider.

Weaknesses

- The most significant initial problem was overcoming staff resistance to the belief that this was "just another one of those faddish programs that 'll go away in a year, why bother getting involved". Despite staff involvement from the very initial stages, this observation continued to be made by various persons throughout the district raising the possibility that this may be an excuse for non-involvement rather than a reason.

- There was also some initial staff resistance to the concept of the teacher-student mentor program particularly at the high school. Staff were concerned that guidance services were already being provided and that they were now being asked to, in addition to their teaching roles, take on the role of counselor. This problem still persists although it has been stressed to staff that participation is voluntary and that they aren't really being asked to do something most of them haven't already done informally, (taking a student "under their wing" and being there as a supportive person).

- Concern was also expressed that the project would take a lot of teacher time and energy, from having to refer a student, to having to follow through on program implementation (depending on the type of program selected) or recommendations by the BLSC. It was certainly true that the programs of DISCOVERY, of the project itself, would require additional staff commitment and energy. However, that additional commitment was not altogether as great as some programs for disaffected and/or disruptive students are for the staff as a whole. Most programs place particular demands on several key people whereas, the DISCOVERY Project attempted to spread out the demands among all staff. Additionally, teachers were reminded that they were already expending considerable time, energy and effort in managing the child with whom they had concerns. The programs and recommendations of the DISCOVERY project should hopefully increase the effectiveness and efficiency of those efforts.

- Finally, the school psychologist, particularly if in the role of coordinator or project chair, must be concerned with overcommitting him/herself. Staff's initial reaction to these students was frequently a desire to send the child to the psychologist for counseling, and while that may be desirable, it is rarely practical given the time limitations placed upon most school psychologists. Beyond that, even with the provision of counseling services the amount of student contact is minimal (usually 20-30 minutes a week) and doesn't remove the necessity for interventions to take place in other aspects of the child's school day. To have the greatest impact on the child, an intervention needs the coordinated efforts of numerous individuals. The School Psychologist should stress the development of competencies of staff in areas about which they may initially feel somewhat uncomfortable. To do so requires the psychologist to take on more of the role of consultant

and trainer rather than always responding as the direct service provided to students. It also requires the psychologist to form an alliance with staff, to become a co-conspirator in the educational process.

CONCLUSION

Overall then, this process of addressing the problem of disaffected and disruptive students represents a vital, flexible and ever evolving approach to system change for the benefit of students because of its use of existing staff talents and expertise and because of its responsiveness to the changing needs of both students and staff.